



ARMY CRITICAL TRADES FOCUS GROUP REPORT NOVEMBER 2001

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ARMY CRITICAL TRADES FOCUS GROUP REPORT

November 2001

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

'Army has identified 47 trades as problematic and 12 have been identified as critical. Critical in this context is defined as a combination of factors including: vacancies are in high priority units and cannot be filled; the vacancies significantly impact on capability; the situation is exacerbated by operational/training tempo; the separation rate for the trade exceeds training throughput, and; the trade is otherwise unrecoverable in five years' (DPERS-A, 2000/26105, 2348/01, dated Apr 01).

DGPERS-A requested DSPPR conduct further investigation into the critical trades to determine the reasons for high vacancies and provide information to assist in developing both common and trade specific retention and recruitment initiatives. The twelve critical trades are ECN 031 Medical Assistant, 067 Crewman Spec 105mm Gunner, 162 Gun Number, 171 Terminal Operator, 226 Mechanic Recovery, 229 Mechanic Vehicle, 237 Missile Number, 256 Op Comd Spt Systems, 274 Op Spec Veh, 294 Operator Supply, 346 Op Bearer System and 405 Tech Elec.

The primary aim of the present qualitative phase of the study was to gather information to allow the development of a questionnaire instrument to be administered to 100% of members of the top twelve critical trades. The eight trades included in the focus groups were ECNs 067 Crewman Spec 105mm Gunner, 294 Op Sup, 162 GN, 031 Med Assist, 405 Tech Elec, 346 Op Bearer, 256 Op Comd Spt Sys and 229 Mech Veh. Qualitative data gathering for the reduced IPS study was undertaken in conjunction with the present focus groups in order to consolidate study costs and minimise over-surveying of these trades.

Focus Groups

The series of focus groups were conducted from 12 Nov to 20 Nov 2001. A total of 143 members from the eight trades participated in the focus groups. In general, one focus group for each of the trades was conducted at 1 Bde (Robertson Barracks, Darwin), 3 Bde (Lavarack Barracks, Townsville) and 7 Bde (Enoggera Barracks, Brisbane). 21 focus groups were conducted in total. The questions were the same for all trades, except for ECNs 162 GN and 294 Op Sup, which included some additional questions on the two year IPS trial.

Main Findings

Remuneration

- Superannuation was the single, most frequently mentioned retention issue. It was considered that DFRDB provided an incentive for soldiers to stay in the Army longer, whereas MSBS was seen to provide no such incentive.

- Pay inequity was an issue for several trades. These concerns related to pay inequity compared to other ECNs in the Army and for some trades, the discrepancy between their Army pay and what they could be earning in civilian employment within their trade.
- Tax free retention bonuses were viewed favourably by members from many trades, with participants in many of the focus groups raising this as a potential retention initiative, particularly at the sign on point after the initial period of service.

Allowances and Other Conditions of Service

- There was general concern over the erosion of conditions of service on the whole, and members were particularly concerned about the erosion of field allowance and proposals to roll allowances into salary.
- There was a consensus that allowances are inadequate for places like Darwin, particularly in terms of the cost of airconditioning, concerns over inadequate remote locality leave travel allowance and the generally high cost of living.

Workload, Land Command Postings and Posting Locality

- Members from several trades discussed the high workload experienced within their trade which is exacerbated by low trade numbers. There are high demands placed on families due to the long hours and time out field in Land Command (LC-A) postings.
- The high proportion of LC-A postings does not allow for physical respite and members from many trades felt the frequent, heavy physical demands of their trade was resulting in personnel being physically 'broken'.
- A major issue for all trades involved was the concentration of positions within their trade in Darwin and Townsville. These locations were seen to hold various disadvantages including remoteness (particularly Darwin) and the associated separation from extended family, high cost of living (eg. food, airconditioning, housing), tropical climate, difficulties with spouse employment, less facilities and health services, perceived lower education standards and the high cost of air travel to other centres which is not adequately covered by allowances. There is still an inadequate amount of new accommodation for the soldiers 'living in' with many still living in substandard accommodation.

Civilianisation and Skill/Knowledge Decay

- Some trades reported being unable to utilise their skills adequately resulting in knowledge and skill decay. This was most often due to civilianisation of part of their function. For some trades (eg. ECN 256, 229) civilianisation has resulted in there being a limited or no 'in barracks' trade role for the ECN.
- Civilianisation has also resulted in a reduction or complete loss of positions in less physically demanding, 'respite' postings. In addition, there was concern over the fact that civilians are taking on a lot of the more complex work, yet they can not be deployed.

Career Management and Training

- Within most of the trades, there was concern over career management, particularly the perceived lack of the Soldier Career Management Agency (SCMA) to take notice of individual posting preferences.
- Participants from several trades stated that corps transfers both into and out of their trade were generally not facilitated.
- Inadequate training was a concern for several trades. Lack of civilian recognition of trade courses was a significant issue for several trades.
- The view was expressed in several focus groups that the six weeks recruit training at Kapooka is now too short and should return to thirteen weeks duration. The shorter recruit training is placing a greater training burden on units.
- Among several trades, there was concern over the lack of opportunities for deployment.

Recruiting

- Many participants thought that recruiting was not doing an adequate job in recruiting to their trade. The view was that recruiters require better education on a broad range of trades so that they can better inform potential recruits of their options.

Other Issues

- On the whole, participants from ECN 162 GN and 294 Op Sup felt that the reduced two year IPS was not a good idea and that it would likely be detrimental to their trade and retention in the long run.
- Lack of resources resulting in out of date equipment or inadequate tools/equipment was of concern.
- Traditionally, conditions of service in terms of allowances and free medical and dental services were attractors and retainers. However, it was perceived that conditions of service are being continually eroded, providing less incentive to remain in the Army.

Trade Specific Concerns

Those issues specific to given trades are outlined in the second half of the report.

Recommendations

- The present generic and trade specific findings be examined by DGPERS-A as an initial indication of the retention and recruitment concerns among the critical trades;
- The present findings be utilised to develop, trial and administer a questionnaire instrument to all members of the top 12 critical trades to provide further quantitative data and trade specific information to allow further targeted initiatives to be developed;

- That the above questionnaire also contain some core items from the Defence Attitude Survey in order to allow comparison of the present critical trades with the wider Army and Defence on key personnel indicators;
- The feedback from the present series of focus groups regarding the reduced IPS trial be utilised as part of the Reduced IPS study being conducted by DSPPR on behalf of DGPERS-A; and
- The present findings raise a number of issues relevant to the Nunn Review of ADF Remuneration and DGPERS-A may wish to consider this feedback in the context of the Nunn consultation process.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

‘Army has identified 47 trades as problematic and 12 have been identified as critical. Critical in this context is defined as a combination of factors including: vacancies are in high priority units and cannot be filled; the vacancies significantly impact on capability; the situation is exacerbated by operational/ training tempo; the separation rate for the trade exceeds training throughput, and; the trade is otherwise unrecoverable in five years’ (DPERS-A, 2000/26105, 2348/01, dated Apr 01).

Some initiatives have already been identified to help address vacancies within these critical trades. For example, ECN 294 Operator Supply (Op Sup) and ECN 162 Gun Number (GN) have been identified for trial of a reduced initial period of service (IPS) due to the perception that the current four year mandatory IPS may be acting as a deterrent for recruiting.

DGPERS-A requested the Directorate of Strategic Personnel Planning and Research (DSPPR) conduct further investigation into the critical trades to determine the reasons for high vacancies and provide information to assist in developing both common and trade specific retention and recruitment initiatives. The twelve critical trades are as follows:

Table 1 Twelve Critical Army Trades

| ECN | Paid Asset |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------|
| ECN 031 Medical Assistant | 423 |
| ECN 067 Crewman Spec 105mm Gunner | 33 |
| ECN 162 Gun Number | 332 |
| ECN 171 Terminal Operator | 100 |
| ECN 226 Mechanic Recovery | 86 |
| ECN 229 Mechanic Vehicle | 603 |
| ECN 237 Missile Number | 123 |
| ECN 256 Op Comd Spt Systems | 185 |
| ECN 274 Op Spec Veh | 97 (RACT) 7 (RAE) |
| ECN 294 Operator Supply | 1308 (incl SGT and WO2) |
| ECN 346 Op Bearer System | 60 |
| ECN 405 Tech Elec | 294 ¹ |

1. Figures correct as at 30 June 2001

It was initially planned that qualitative data gathering for all of the 12 above listed ECNs would be carried out in order to determine the relevant issues for inclusion in a questionnaire instrument to be administered to 100% of members from the 12 trades. However, at the request of LC-A, the number of trades included in the focus groups was 'downsized' due to operational tempo reasons to the top seven most critical trades as well as ECN 162 GN due to its inclusion in the reduced IPS trial.

Accordingly, the eight trades included in the focus groups were ECNs 067 Crewman Spec 105mm Gunner, 294 Op Sup, 162 GN, 031 Med Assist, 405 Tech Elec, 346 Op Bearer, 256 Op Comd Spt Sys and 229 Mech Veh. Army Trade Management Cell and the LC-A contact believed that the issues would be sufficiently consistent among the critical trades to leave out the other four trades from the qualitative part of the study for later inclusion in the questionnaire survey.

Qualitative data gathering for the reduced IPS study was undertaken in conjunction with the present focus groups in order to consolidate study costs and minimise over-surveying of these trades.

Focus Group Objectives

The objectives of the focus groups were to:

Identify those retention and recruitment issues that are generic and relevant to all the critical trades;

Identify those retention and recruitment issues that are trade specific;

Gather views of ECN 162 GN and 294 Op Sup regarding the reduced IPS trial, and;

Incorporate these findings into a survey questionnaire instrument appropriate for administration with all top 12 critical trades to examine the salient retention and recruitment issues and initiatives relevant to these trades.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

A total of 143 members from the eight trades participated in the focus groups. DSPPR requested that the focus groups be comprised mostly of members from PTE to CPL rank, with smaller proportions of members from SGT to WO1. Approximate total proportions by rank for all the participants were PTE 42%, LCPL 8%, CPL 26%, SGT 18% and WO2/WO1 6%.

In general, one focus group for each of the trades was conducted at 1 Bde (Robertson Barracks, Darwin), 3 Bde (Lavarack Barracks, Townsville) and 7 Bde (Enoggera Barracks, Brisbane). Liaison for the organisation of the groups and selection of appropriate contacts was coordinated by LC-A. Twenty-one focus groups were conducted in total. The number of participants per focus group for each location is shown in Table 1. Some focus groups contained less than eight participants due to there being less than eight members of the trade posted to the given location or lack of availability due to competing work commitments/operations.

Table 2 Number of focus group participants per trade for each location.

| No. Participants | Darwin (ECN) | Townsville (ECN) | Brisbane (ECN) |
|------------------|--------------------|--------------------|----------------|
| 3 | 346 | 346 | 031 |
| 5 | 031 | 031 | |
| 6 | | | 256, 229 |
| 7 | 294 | 294 | 294 |
| 8 | 229, 067, 405, 256 | 405, 229, 162, 256 | 162, 405 |
| 9 | 162 | | |

Procedure

The series of focus groups were conducted from 12 Nov to 20 Nov 2001. In each location, two focus groups were generally run at parallel times by two separate DSPPR facilitators. Up to six groups were conducted on each day (maximum of three per facilitator).

A standardised introduction was presented to each group at the outset, explaining the purpose of the focus groups. The confidentiality of the data was emphasised and it was explained that the focus groups were semi-structured group discussions and that the facilitators wished to hear the opinions of all the participants.

A proforma of questions or ‘prompters’ for the discussions were distributed following the introduction (see Annex A). These were the same for all trades, except for ECNs 162 GN and 294 Op Sup, which included some additional questions on the two year IPS trial.

Broadly, the issues covered in the focus groups related to trade retention, recruiting, non job related issues (eg. posting locations) and suggested initiatives to improve retention. Participants were asked to comment on their trade specifically, though some issues raised were clearly generic and were relevant to the Army as a whole.

The groups ran from 45 minutes to 1 hour 30 minutes in duration.

Focus Group Methodology

Focus groups provide many benefits in terms of data collection. They allow researchers to actively consult members of a population and to become involved in the formulation of study questions and issues. Focus groups allow the feedback of relevant and timely qualitative data.

However, focus groups also have limitations. Due to their very nature they allow for the views of those who have a predilection for speaking up in a public forum to have their views heard. Members of a focus group who are in a position of recognised authority (for example, high rank) or unrecognised authority (that is, strong personality) within the group may lead the views expressed.

The issues raised in the present report are the perceptions of the participants as expressed during the focus group interviews and may not necessarily represent statements of fact.

RESULTS

As predicted, there were both generic and trade specific issues raised in the focus groups. The main generic issues will be discussed first, that is, those issues that were raised as relevant to recruitment and retention in all or a high proportion of the focus groups. Quotes are provided as illustrative examples only and due to space requirements do not necessarily in themselves reflect all specific issues for all the trades interviewed. The generic issues will be followed by a discussion addressing trade specific issues.

Generic Issues

Remuneration

Superannuation

Superannuation was the single, most frequently mentioned retention issue in the focus groups. There was general concern over the changes that have been made to the superannuation system over the years and there was a considerable degree of dissatisfaction with MSBS. It was considered that DFRDB provided an incentive for soldiers to stay in the Army longer, whereas MSBS was seen to provide no such incentive. Additionally, many participants stated that the rules related to MSBS had changed since they had initially signed up to the scheme. Concerns about superannuation were mentioned spontaneously in almost all the focus groups that were conducted.

'They keep changing the goal posts with MSBS. They changed them after everyone had signed on' (229 Mech Veh)

'There are a lot of DFRDB guys reaching their 20 years and getting out and at the same time there is no incentive for those on MSBS to stay in' (405 Tech Elec)

There was also concern regarding the gap between the compulsory Defence Force retirement age and the age at which MSBS superannuation funds become available.

Pay Inequity

Pay inequity was an issue for a number of trades. Members of 067 Crewman Spec 105mm Gunner, 031 Med Assist, 346 Op Bearer, 256 Op Comd Spt Sys, 405 Tech Elec and 294 Op Sup were particularly concerned. These concerns related to pay inequity compared to other ECNs in the Army and for some trades, the discrepancy between their Army pay and what they could be earning in civilian employment within their trade. Pay inequity was of particular concern where trade members received greater training than some other Army ECNs but yet received less pay.

'How come I am receiving pay group 3 as a full CPL when an infantry soldier with far less training and experience is getting pay group 4?' (294 Op Sup)

'There is a pay discrepancy between the RAEME and Sigs trades which makes corps transfer and recruitment to Sigs more attractive. We also have access to very attractive civilian employment packages.' (405 Tech Elec)

'We get two years training and get paid the same as some ECNs who have received two months training. We should get more pay for our level of training.' (405 Tech Elec)

Retention Bonuses

Tax free retention bonuses were viewed favourably by members from many trades, with participants in many of the focus groups raising this as a potential retention initiative, particularly at the sign on point after the initial period of service.

'There should be an emphasis on keeping people in, so offer incentives. The emphasis should be on retention due to the experience you lose when someone discharges or trade transfers.' (294 Op Sup)

Allowances and Other Conditions of Service

There was general concern over the erosion of conditions of service on the whole.

*'If you strip the benefits and keep the c**p, you can't expect people to stay'* (229 Mech Veh)

There was a consensus that allowances are inadequate for places like Darwin, particularly in terms of family leave travel, the cost of airconditioning, lack of a remote locality allowance and the generally high cost of living (food etc.).

There was particular concern over the erosion of field allowance, with many members feeling that field allowance was inadequate given the amount of field work required.

Some participants raised the proposal to roll most allowances into salary and proposals related to The Nunn Review of ADF Remuneration. Participants were not positive regarding such proposals as they felt that allowances should be kept separate from salary and should not be included in income for tax purposes.

Several participants felt that the Home Purchase and Sales Expense Allowance (HSPEA) encourages members to 'settle down'. Although they thought it a good idea on the whole that the allowance exists, they also acknowledged that buying and selling when moving frequently tended to be more hassle than it was worth.

‘Encouraging people to buy houses causes people to want to stay put in one location. They get attached and put down roots.’ (294 Op Sup)

Workload and LC-A Posting Issues

LC-A Posting Concentration

Members from several trades discussed the high workload experienced within their trade. This was seen to be a ‘vicious circle’ that is exacerbated by low trade numbers where the greater the shortage of personnel the worse the retention problem brought on by excessive workload.

‘Due to low numbers, our trade has quite a reliance on Army Reservists, but our trade is not attractive to them when they could be running around with guns or driving tanks.’ (294 Op Sup)

In addition to the problems often associated with living in Townsville and Darwin, there is the additional workload and demands placed on families by the fact that these postings are LC-A postings (‘field force’), involving high workload and often a large proportion of time in the field on exercise.

‘Army life for married people is very hard. There are multiple concerns up here as well as the high workload.’ (294 Op Sup)

‘You can’t keep people on their toes from year to year, putting them in constant field force postings.’ (256 Op Comd Spt Sys)

Lack of Respite Postings: Physical Injury and Occupational Health and Safety

The high proportion of LC-A postings does not allow for physical respite and members from many trades felt the frequent, heavy physical demands of their trade are resulting in personnel being physically ‘broken’. There were seen to be few opportunities for such members to be posted into positions which are less physically demanding, resulting in medical discharges for some members who could still make a valuable contribution.

‘Now when they break people they kick them out rather than put them in a log battalion. They should rehab. them properly rather than kick them out. People are scared to go to the medic.’ (229 Mech Veh)

‘We get physically hammered. We go from one field posting to another with no break. People get burnt out.’ (346 Op Bearer)

Posting Locality

A major issue for all trades involved was the concentration of positions within their trade in Darwin and Townsville. These locations were seen to hold various disadvantages including remoteness (particularly Darwin) and the associated separation from extended family, high cost of living (eg. food, airconditioning,

housing), tropical climate, perceived lower education standards and the high cost of air travel to other centres which is not adequately covered by allowances. It was felt that spouse employment opportunities are also limited in these centres and that they lack many of the facilities associated with larger urban centres such as large department store chains and adequate specialist and ancillary health services. Daycare services are also particularly expensive.

Problems and family issues associated with living in Townsville and Darwin tended to be more salient for older and married members, though these issues were of concern across the board.

The issue of inadequate in-barracks accommodation in Darwin was raised several times. There is seen to be an inadequate amount of new accommodation for the soldiers 'living in' with many still living in substandard accommodation.

'How can we make Darwin better? Move it to Brisbane! It is way too remote.' (229 Mech Veh)

'Regardless of what people say, Darwin is isolated. It is cost prohibitive to visit family more than once a year. Some people corps transfer purely to get postings down south.' (067 Crewman Spec 105mm Gunner)

'Several of the soldiers lines in Robertson are condemned and the young soldiers still pay the full R&Q to live in them, with no option of RA.' (067 Crewman Spec 105mm Gunner)

Civilianisation and Skill/Knowledge Decay

Some trades reported being unable to utilise their skills adequately resulting in knowledge and skill decay. These trades included ECN 229 Mech Veh, 256 Op Comd Spt Sys, 405 Tech Elec, 346 Op Bearer and 031 Med Assist. This was most often due to civilianisation of part of their function. For some trades (eg. ECN 256, 229) civilianisation has resulted in there being a limited or no 'in barracks' trade role for the ECN. This exacerbates skill decay, sometimes resulting in trade members lacking the confidence and skills to appropriately handle tasks when in the field.

Civilianisation has also resulted in a reduction or complete loss of positions in less physically demanding, 'respite' postings. In addition, there was concern over the fact that civilians are taking on a lot of the more complex work, yet they can not be deployed.

'There are too many civis, they are not responsive and cannot be deployed.' (405 Tech Elec)

'When you mainly do your trade work out bush you lose your knowledge with the time lags between exercises. This results in a lot of doubt about how to handle situations in the field and you tend to take the more conser-

vative option, like replace the whole assembly rather than component or drag the vehicle back to base.’ (229 Mech Veh)

‘Civi contractors can’t be deployed or go out field. With so many of them, military people are losing their skills and experience.’ (346 Op Bearer)

Career Management and Training

SCMA and Posting Preferences

Within most of the trades, there was concern over career management, particularly the perceived lack of the Soldier Career Management Agency (SCMA) to take notice of individual posting preferences. There was a perception that SCMA is understaffed and lacks representation in many regions.

‘SCMA play pin the tail on the donkey when assigning postings’ (294 Op Sup)

‘ SCMA need to read posting reports and consider where individuals want to go’ (256 Op Comd Spt Sys)

‘I know of two guys in my trade, one wanted to go to Brisbane and the other one to Darwin. The one who wanted to go to Brisbane got Darwin and vice versa. There was no reason why they couldn’t have both received their preferences’ (294 Op Sup)

Corps Transfers

Participants from several trades stated that Corps transfers both into and out of their trade were generally not facilitated and that it appears that the Army would rather lose members completely in some cases, rather than allow them to Corps or trade transfer.

‘People can see the bigger picture. They see other trades with easier jobs, higher pay and less workload and they transfer out.’ (294 Op Sup)

Inadequate Trade Training and Lack of Civilian Accreditation

Inadequate training was a concern for several trades, in particular ECN 294 Op Sup and 256 Op Comd Spt Sys with members being expected to carry out duties for which they have no training.

Lack of civilian recognition of trade courses was a significant issue for several trades. In some cases, this was causing members to discharge in order to gain civilian accredited qualifications whilst still young enough to commence a civilian career.

Recruit Training

The view was expressed in several focus groups that the six weeks recruit training at Kapooka is now too short and should return to thirteen weeks duration. The shorter recruit training is placing a greater training burden on units with several participants stating that new soldiers are not equipped with all basic soldiering skills on entering units.

Opportunities for Deployment

Among several trades, there was concern over the lack of opportunities for deployment. This was not the case for ECN 405 where some members perceive they receive so many deployments that they end up 'burnt out'.

Recruiting

Many participants thought that recruiting was not doing an adequate job in recruiting to their trade. Several members said that they felt that recruiters tended to try to recruit to their own trade rather than the critical trades. The view was that recruiters require better education on a broad range of trades so that they can better inform potential recruits of their options.

There was also a view that a return to batch processing would likely improve the critical trade situation through being able to direct recruits into trades with inadequate numbers.

Other Issues

Two Year Initial Period of Service Trial

ECN 162 Gun Number and 294 Operator Supply were asked about their thoughts regarding the two year IPS trial being conducted with their trades. On the whole, participants from these trades felt that the reduced two year IPS was not a good idea and that it would likely be detrimental to their trade and retention in the long run. It was felt that it might provide an initial boost in recruit numbers but that just as trade members were becoming useful to their units they would leave. Members felt that it would bring forward the natural attrition which occurs at the end of the IPS to the two year rather than four year mark and that the two year mark is just when soldiers start to become useful and productive within their units. These same new soldiers would also receive only one posting experience giving them an inadequate trade overview. It was felt that the anticipated increased turnover would place an even greater training burden on units.

There were no significant differences of opinion between ECN 162 and 294 participants on this issue.

'If you don't fix the source of the retention problems in the trade then 70% of the newbies will discharge after two years.' (162 GN)

Resources

Lack of resources resulting in out of date equipment or inadequate tools/ equipment was of concern, particularly for 229 Mech Veh, 256 Op Comd Spt Sys, 067 Crewman Spec 105mm Gunner and 162 GN.

'We used to have everything we needed, now we don't have the money for glues, oils etc. These sorts of things slow us up. The unit is supposed to buy the special work uniforms but they don't buy enough of them. One guy had to buy his own shorts.' (229 Mech Veh)

Reasons for Staying

The most commonly reported reason for members to stay in the Army was job security. They also stated that traditionally, conditions of service in terms of allowances and free medical and dental services were attractors and retainers. However, it was perceived that conditions of service are being continually eroded, providing less incentive to remain in the Army given the demands and stresses of their trade and the Army in general.

'People stay in the Army because of job security, free medical and DFRDB.' (294 Op Sup)

For a few trades, job satisfaction was also a reason for remaining in the trade (eg. 067 Crewman Spec 105mm Gunner).

Trade Specific Issues

The following section discusses those retention and recruitment issues that were unique to each trade and re-emphasises the major generic concerns for each.

ECN 294 Operator Supply

The Op Sup members stated that their job tended to be somewhat boring and mundane and that this was the perception of their trade among other trades and recruiting. Some members reported receiving a lack of respect from other trades in general. Undermanning is a significant issue, exacerbating the high workload within the trade. There were also concerns over the lack of civilian accredited qualifications offered.

'Weekend work and late work is common, then they expect you to do sport on Thursday. There is a big strain on family.'

Members reported that a desire to transfer out of the trade was common but that it was difficult to do so. Low pay compared to some other trades and lack of useful civilian qualifications were some of the main reasons for this.

There was significant concern regarding the 1997 trade amalgamation which resulted in ECN 294. Members stated that the nature of the job was now so broad and differed so significantly across units that members could march into a unit and have very little background or training in their new role. This has placed a huge training burden on already stretched unit resources.

The general issues of lack of locational stability, the concentration of postings in Darwin and Townsville and the perceived lack of SCMA to take note of posting preferences, and lack of deployment opportunities were other issues of particular concern.

Some positive views of the trade included that the work is generally not too physically demanding and that the skills gained provide some opportunities for civilian employment. Once again, job security was seen to be the major retainer. Some members suggested that a medical waiver be placed on the trade in order to increase trade transfers from members with downgraded medical status.

ECN 299 Vehicle Mechanic

The most significant concern among members of this trade was the loss of job satisfaction and skills brought about by civilianisation of part of their trade function. The trade work now primarily involves changing of components and this has resulted in a lack of trade task diversity. Any repairs or rebuilds are outsourced which is resulting in loss of trade knowledge. Participants stated that there is a perception that ECN 229 provides useful trade qualifications, but as trade members only work on diesel engines, their competencies that are relevant to civilian work tend to be lost.

Members felt that there was a significant pool of young applicants being lost through the disbandment of the apprentice school and the subsequent inability to recruit members younger than 17. There was also a perception that the level of training had decreased with the reduction in the training to 18 months duration.

Due to civilianisation of much of the vehicle mechanics role, the members are often directed to undertake tasks they perceive to be menial, secondary duties. There was a perception that because they are members of infantry units, more emphasis is placed on administrative duties than the vehicle mechanics role.

'There is too much emphasis on soldier skills and not enough on spanner skills.'

'We're lucky to get 17.5 hours a week productivity – the rest of the time is spent doing admin and 'green' stuff'

There were also concerns over the Reserves, particularly in Brisbane. Participants stated that Reserve members expect a lot to be done by regular members but that there is a lack of accountability of Reserve members.

The parts system was discussed, with members stating that it is very inefficient and that it can take weeks or months for parts to arrive. This was a significant cause of frustration.

Members expressed the view that if LOGCOMD had not been disbanded, that this would provide the respite posting opportunities required within the trade. TAFE training was not seen to be a viable option for most personnel as they did not have the time to study.

As with members of the other trades, the vehicle mechanics were also particularly concerned about the proportion of postings in Darwin and Townsville, the difficulty in transferring out of the trade, SCMA, superannuation, and inequities in deployment within the trade. Some trade members have virtually gone from one deployment to another whilst others have not been given any deployment opportunities.

On the positive side, some participants liked the Army lifestyle, with the opportunities for deployments and field work.

ECN 031 Medical Assistant

Pay level was a particular concern for this trade. Members felt that given their high level of training and their duties, pay group three is inadequate. There was also concern over the lack of promotion prospects in the trade.

‘It is an insult to be on pay level 3. Medics at all levels are doing their job day to day – not just when they are out field.’

There are seen to be inadequate training places available for the Med. Assist. course and there is a significant time lag between courses. New recruits are getting attracted to other trades rather than wait in holding platoons for the next Med Assist course. The initial training is also long which can be a disincentive to new recruits or trade transferees.

Tri-Service rationalisation of the training is seen to cause problems. The role of a Med Assist was perceived to differ quite significantly across the Services, and therefore the view was that the tri-Service training is inappropriately focussed for this reason.

There was also concern over the lack of ongoing training for medics and the lack of civilian accredited qualifications. High unit workload is seen to restrict opportunities for further study. Additionally, there is no specific training offered in sports injuries even though attending to sports injuries is one of the main duties of the Army medic.

‘You may end up with great clinical skills but these are not recognised on civvy street without the qualifications to go with it.’

‘Retention in this trade is a big issue. Many members elect to discharge to pursue further study as they are unable to do so while in the Army.’

The level of administrative work required by trade members is resulting in frustration and high workload and this situation is exacerbated by low trade numbers. Members also expressed the need for clerical assistance.

Civilianisation was also a major issue for this trade. There are no longer any respite posting opportunities as these positions have been taken over by civilian employees. As with several other trades, this has resulted in Med Assists being unable to utilise and practise some of their trade skills. Members felt that it is while they are on deployment that they best get to utilise their skills, yet many deployment opportunities are being given to Reservists. However, it was felt that many Reservists did not have the skills and experience to go on deployment.

The degree of change in the trade including new healthcare procedures and changes to medical boards have caused frustration as medics are not sure of new procedures. The communication of these changes to medics was seen to be inadequate and the degree of change was perceived to be excessive.

Suggestions to improve retention included retention bonuses, providing outplacements to civilian hospitals or ambulance services through liaison at a high level, better training for GRES medics, better civilian recognition of qualifications and a greater focus on attracting trade transferees.

'Most of the good operators are retreads. They understand how to be a soldier and we can concentrate on training them how to be a medic.'

ECN 405 Electronic Technician

Electronic Technicians find it relatively easy to obtain well paid civilian employment, often with significantly greater remuneration and ongoing training than they receive in the Army. There is also a pay discrepancy between RAEME and Signals electronic technicians which was of concern. Members felt that they should get paid more given their level of training in that trade members complete two years of training and yet receive the same pay as some other trades who received two months of training. Lack of manning is a significant issue in the trade.

Additionally, the lack of equipment to do the job properly, the use of out-dated equipment (particularly when in barracks) and civilianisation and the associated inability to utilise and develop trade skills were the most significant trade specific concerns.

'We swap faulty parts for working ones. If we were able to do what we are training for it would be enjoyable, but our current work is monotonous.'

'People join the trade to learn to repair things and then use this knowledge in their workplace. They don't get to do the latter.'

'The ratio of North to South positions is now about 50/50 – this discourages people from staying.'

Members were concerned about the proposal to put all potential Electronic Technicians through one year of work as an ECN 346 Op Bearer System. Participants thought that this could cause problems in recruiting to ECN 405.

Members stated that they were not aware of any ECN 405 member planning to stay for longer than their minimum time of six years. They also believed that going on deployment was in some ways a 'two edged sword', in that it was stimulating and provided professional development but that returning to the routine of being back on base was difficult. Electronic technicians are a trade which experiences a lot of deployment and some operators have gone from one deployment to another resulting in burnout.

Once again, there was concern amongst this trade that those of lower medical standard do not have the option to be placed in the type of respite trade positions that are now filled by civilians. The generic concerns regarding superannuation, workload and lack of manning, inequity in posting plots, and the amount of field time were also apparent. It was felt that retention bonuses would be effective at the worst separation points, but that better ongoing education with return of service obligations attached could be just as effective.

ECN 256 Operator Command Support Systems

Perhaps the major concern for this trade was the lack of adequate ongoing training. Participants felt that the Army expects them to pay for their own ongoing training and that units are mostly unwilling to pay due to the high cost of many information technology courses. Another major concern is the degree of civilianisation. There was seen to be little 'in barracks' role for the trade as this was the remit of DISG. This has resulted in the usual concerns with regard to skill degradation through lack of in- barracks work. Members suggested that there needed to be some compromise between ECN 256 and DISG to allow trade members to have an in barracks trade role. As per several other trades, civilianisation has reduced the number of respite or easier postings with most positions left in LC-A units.

'The integration of Army and civilians needs to be a lot better. Army members could help out civilian staff and maintain their skills at the same time.'

Clearly these trade members find it relatively easy to obtain well paid civilian employment with associated ongoing training and the pay discrepancy with civilian employment is a retention issue. Several participants stated that the role should be a profession rather than a trade due to the level of training required and the usefulness of the role to the Army.

Most of the present trade members were trade transferees. They stated that trade transferees should be given priority to enter the trade over new recruits as they tend to have a better understanding of the ECN 256 role, but that loss of rank on transfer was a concern that should be examined. Members felt that recruiters were not properly informed of the trade role and accordingly new recruits tended to lack a clear understanding of the role. New recruits also tended to have the computing skills required but often lacked the aptitude to be a soldier. There also

needs to be a clear definition of the trade qualifications obtained at the outset so that new recruits are informed of what training they will receive.

Both junior and senior soldiers stated that the junior soldiers tended to have far greater technical knowledge than the senior NCOs as their initial trade training was up to date.

There was also concern over inadequate trade 'tool boxes', particularly regarding the lack of software that they require to do their job. Trade members are being forced to use pirated software in some cases. Some hardware (laptops, cable testers etc) is also lacking.

Although retention bonuses were viewed favourably, many members suggested that access to civilian training courses (with attached ROSO) and adequate opportunities to utilise their skills in barracks would be more effective ways to increase retention. Members suggested that there needed to be a better career structure for the trade with associated training targets.

The generic concerns regarding dissatisfaction with MSBS and a preference for DFRDB and its retention advantages were once again voiced by members of this trade as were concerns regarding SCMA and posting plots. Participants suggested that those members who stay in the Army long term are doing so for the job security.

ECN 162 Gun Number

There were concerns over the lack of promotion of the trade by recruiting and the fact that there seems to be no specific advertising devoted to the trade. Some members suggested demonstration days to provide trade exposure to potential recruits. However, as expressed by one member:

'You would need to improve the attitude of current members first as word of mouth would not be good at the moment.'

There are no civilian qualifications attached to the trade. There used to be many other trades in which GN could gain a qualification but this has become increasingly difficult. Many members apply for corps transfer to gain qualifications before leaving the Army.

A lack of resources, especially ammunition has resulted in members being unable to practice their trade on a regular enough basis. It is therefore difficult for them to maintain their skills. There is also no in barracks trade role, resulting in idleness, a lot of 'creating work' and low job satisfaction.

'Artillery offers you nothing. You can do the same thing for 10 years.'

There are few overseas posting opportunities for the trade as ECN 162 has no peacekeeping role. Deployment opportunities are limited to out of trade

deployments, usually with infantry units, but few such opportunities are available.

Injuries are a significant retention problem. Members must lift heavy equipment, yet are often not fit for this given the lack of an in-barracks trade role. Insufficient manning results in short cuts and this tends to lead to accidents and injuries. Members tend to be discharged rather than transferred to trades with lower medical requirements.

There was concern over the equipment that was considered outdated in terms of capability and range compared to equivalent equipment in overseas militaries. The gun is also particularly heavy, which compounds the occupational health and safety issues.

‘There is a tendency to rush medically unfit people back into duty because of manning shortages. Many end up physically broken.’

Posting location issues, superannuation and pay inequity were some of the paramount generic concerns. Views regarding the reduced IPS trial were not positive, as outlined in the generic issues section. Members suggested greater opportunity for non-corps postings and deployments, greater access to civilian recognised educational opportunities and increased meaningful work in barracks are some changes that would improve trade morale.

‘We could be attached to an infantry battalion to get more experience on ops and overseas. We should work together with them more in peace time.’

ECN 067 Crewman Specialist 105mm Gunner

Trade members perceived problems with recruiting. They felt that unless the individual recruiter is from an armoured corps background then they do not have any idea of the ECN 065/067 role. Participants suggested that better education of recruiters is required and that they are being sent some recruits who are inappropriate and lack the required mechanical aptitude. Currently there is no requirement for recruits to hold a drivers licence to become a tank driver, and participants felt this should be a trade prerequisite. Additionally, several members felt that IET and basic training are too short which puts an additional training burden on units. Members suggested that the number of recruiting positions open to their trade should be increased.

Participants stated that the main reason that ECN 067 is classed as critical is because ECN 065 members move on to 067 at the four year mark. ECN 067 follows on from the 065 base tank driver trade. Therefore, qualification for the trade is obtained at the end of the initial period of service for members of ECN 065 which is a major separation point for most trades.

Members reported that the trade can be very satisfying for those who are suited to it. However, the job is physically hard and demanding, requiring work in high temperatures for extended periods of time.

'It's a hard life. You can be stuck in a 60 degree hole for 8 hours for 8 weeks at a time. It is typical to spend five months per year out field.'

There were concerns over the system for procuring equipment and making upgrades on existing equipment. The current equipment is quite old and out dated in some cases. Members stated that they have many ideas for upgrading and improving the existing tank but they feel that their opinions are not valued in this regard.

'For projects involving equipment design there needs to be people involved who know the tank and the capability of the equipment. There was a lot of money wasted on buying the airconditioning units which didn't work and ended up being ripped out. We could have bought a workable solution because they do exist. An MP was in charge of upgrading tanks at one stage.....the disillusionment filters down.'

Location was a key issue for this trade as all positions are in Darwin, with associated concerns regarding isolation, cost of living, erosion of field allowance, family issues and poor living in accommodation. Many trade members corps transfer in order to get postings in the South. Members wanted living out allowance to be more readily available.

The lack of useful civilian accredited qualifications is an issue for the trade. Additionally, there is very limited opportunity for ECN 067 to go on deployment which causes frustration. Members stated that the system of reciprocal transfers with overseas squadrons needs to be maintained for motivational reasons.

Retention bonuses were viewed favourably as were more opportunities for respite postings. Civilianisation of maintenance and repairs, particularly at Puckapunyal was a cause of frustration due to lack of timeliness of repairs and a perceived lack of control over the operations of the hanger.

'It costs \$110,000 in ammo only to train a 067. Retention bonuses need to be viewed in this light in terms of thinking about how many training dollars and how much knowledge is lost when people leave.'

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Though there were clearly some trade specific concerns among the focus group participants, the majority of recruitment and retention issues were generic and applied across the board.

Remuneration concerns were high on the list of issues. The single most frequently mentioned issue was the changes to superannuation and its perceived affect on retention. Participants felt that DFRDB provided far more incentive for members to remain in the Army for the long term. Pay inequity was of concern to many ECNs in terms of both salary compared to other Army ECNs and in some cases the discrepancy with what they could be earning in civilian employment. There was general concern over the erosion of allowances and conditions of service and retention bonuses were viewed favourably.

High workload due to low manning and the concentration of postings for these trades in LC-A units was also a primary concern. LC-A postings allow little respite for members and place a considerable strain on families due to the amount of time the members spend out field. Periodic physical strain and heavy lifting when out in the field often coupled with a lack of physical activity when in barracks is an occupational health and safety concern. There was also a general concern over lack of resources (eg. Trade tools, work uniforms, software) to do the job.

The high proportion of postings for these trades in Darwin and Townsville was a concern with the associated isolation, climate, high cost of living, separation from extended family, limited spousal employment opportunities etc.

In terms of career management, participants were concerned about the perceived lack of SCMA to take note of posting preferences, the fact that corps transfers are often not facilitated, inadequate trade training or lack of civilian accredited training, the shortened recruit training and inequities in deployment opportunities.

Civilianisation and it's affect on trade roles was a major concern among many trades as it has resulted in trades losing part of their function or in some cases, virtually all of their in-barracks trade role. This is resulting in low job satisfaction and morale and knowledge and skill decay. Civilianisation has also resulted in a loss of respite postings for trade members, with these positions mostly being filled by civilian personnel.

Members were concerned that recruiting was not making enough effort to recruit to the critical trades and that recruiters require more education on the different trades available. GN and Op Sup members were not positive regarding the two year IPS trial for their trades and felt that it might be detrimental to trade retention in the long run, bringing forward the attrition spike which tends to occur after the initial period of service.

Recommendations

- The present generic and trade specific findings be examined by DGPERS-A as an initial indication of the retention and recruitment concerns among the critical trades;
- The present findings be utilised to develop, trial and administer a questionnaire instrument to all members of the top 12 critical trades to provide further quantitative data and trade specific information to allow further targeted initiatives to be developed;
- That the above questionnaire also contain some core items from the Defence Attitude Survey in order to allow comparison of the present critical trades with the wider Army and Defence on key personnel indicators;
- The feedback from the present series of focus groups regarding the reduced IPS trial be utilised as part of the Reduced IPS study being conducted by DSPPR on behalf of DGPERS-A; and,
- The present findings raise a number of issues relevant to the Nunn Review of ADF Remuneration and DGPERS-A may wish to consider this feedback in the context of the Nunn consultation process.

ANNEX A - ARMY CRITICAL TRADES FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. Intro – What is it like to be a member of your trade? What are your main tasks/ roles? Is it enjoyable on the whole? What is the best part of the job?

2. Do you think adequate numbers are attracted to your trade at recruiting?

If not, how could greater numbers be attracted?

What are the factors that encourage Army applicants to apply for your trade?

How did you find out about the trade?

3. Is retention in your trade an issue?

What do you believe are the reasons that soldiers of your trade discharge or apply for a corps/trade transfer?

What do you think encourages those who stay to do so?

4. Are there any issues not related to the job itself (eg. location) that you think are affecting recruiting and retention in your trade?

5. The option of a two-year initial period of service is now being offered to applicants applying for the GN and Op Sup trades.

What do you think might be the benefits of this scheme?

What do you think might be the problems with this scheme?

6. What do you think are the main reasons for inadequate numbers in all or part of your trade structure?

7. What other things do you think could be done to improve retention in your trade (eg. trade changes, incentives, change location etc)?

8. Have we missed anything?

N.B. Qu. 5 was only included for ECNs 294 Op Sup and 162 GN

